

STARK, BECERRA, AND THOMPSON CALL ON SCHWARZENEGGER TO DEVELOP A CHILD WELFARE DISASTER PLAN

Tuesday, 29 August 2006

Unprepared to safeguard foster children in case of disaster, California risks post-Katrina, Louisiana-style chaos

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Representatives Pete Stark (CA-13), Xavier Becerra (CA-31), and Mike Thompson (CA-1) today called on California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to develop and implement a comprehensive child welfare disaster plan. In a letter to Schwarzenegger, Stark, Becerra, and Thompson cited a recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that found that California has no strategy for safeguarding foster children in the case of a disaster. Louisiana lacked a similar plan before Katrina. As a result, nearly half of the state's foster children went missing when disaster struck.

"A year after Katrina, California still lacks a plan to protect foster children in case of disaster," said Stark. "Without proper planning and preparation, California's 82,000 foster children will be at risk if an earthquake, flood, or wildfire strikes. I call on Governor Schwarzenegger to immediately develop and implement a comprehensive child welfare disaster plan. The Governor must terminate a potential tragedy before it becomes a reality."

The GAO report is available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06944.pdf#search=%22gao-06-944%22>.

The letter is available at http://www.house.gov/stark/news/109th/letters/20060829_welfaregap.pdf. The text of the letter follows:

August 29, 2006

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger

State Capitol Building

Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

We are writing to draw your attention to a dangerous gap in California's Child Welfare system and request that you act quickly to fill this gap.

We all serve on the Committee on Ways and Means in the House of Representatives. Our Committee recently requested a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on state disaster planning for children in their welfare programs. We were very alarmed to learn that California is one of numerous states that fails to have a written child welfare disaster plan. California has no plan in place to safeguard foster children in the case of a cataclysmic event, such as an earthquake, which is a relevant concern to our state. If children are dispersed in such an event, our state has no plan of how to locate them or account for their well-being.

Dealing with problems ad hoc after a disaster has deadly consequences. In the case of the child welfare system, workers will likely be displaced and dealing with their own crises and thus unable to effectively account for the children in their caseload. Children may have fled to neighboring counties and will be scared and unaware of where to turn for help. Although these problems are inevitable in the aftermath of a disaster, they can be mitigated through effective preparation and planning.

As we all witnessed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when governments do not have plans in place to deal with disasters lives are lost and children suffer. Post-Katrina, nearly half of Louisiana's foster children were unaccounted for and many of the state's child welfare records were damaged or destroyed. Louisiana had no child welfare disaster plan in place. A similar man-made disaster could easily happen in California if we do not act now to prepare. Californians know all too well that our state is especially prone to the wrath of nature: wildfires, flooding, tsunamis, mudslides, and earthquakes.

Currently there is no federal requirement that states have child welfare disaster plans. We are working with our colleagues in Congress to change this, but in the meantime it is the responsibility of states to take action and develop comprehensive plans that will protect children. Many states have been proactive and developed plans to protect foster children. Unfortunately, California lags far behind neighboring states such as Nevada and Oregon that have disaster plans in place. This dangerous situation has to change. California needs to be prepared to provide continuity of services for children and families who have been dispersed across county and state lines by disasters.

It is also important to highlight that not all disaster plans are created equal. The GAO report suggests that state plans include the following components:

- identification of children who may be dispersed,
- identification of caseworkers who may be dispersed,
- continuation of services for dispersed children,
- coordination of services and sharing of information with intrastate agencies and agencies in other states,
- preservation of essential case information,
- a method of identifying new child welfare cases and providing appropriate services,
- placements for children from other states.

California is responsible for the care of approximately 82,000 foster children, the largest foster care population in the country and about 20% of all foster children in America. With so many children potentially at risk, California must be a national leader in protecting our foster children. Our state spends \$4.7 billion a year on child welfare. There is no reason that a tiny portion of that money cannot be used to ensure that California's most vulnerable children are safe in the aftermath of a disaster. We respectfully request that your administration take the steps necessary to heed the warning of the GAO report and protect our children. We stand ready to assist you in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Pete Stark

Member of Congress

Xavier Becerra

Member of Congress

Mike Thompson

Member of Congress